presupposing the validity of 'the general rule of truth' during the proof for the existence of God later in the same meditation. For in the midst of his main proof for the existence of God[137] he anticipates the objection that the idea of God on which the cogency of the argument depends, though it might be clear and distinct, could still be false, with the response that this would be impossible – because this idea be the most clear and distinct, and therefore the most true, of all ideas.[138] Now he overtly regards the demonstration of the validity of 'the general rule of truth' as being located 'in Meditation IV',[139] at the end of which he states the proof.[140] This is also confirmed by a retrospective claim, which occurs toward the beginning of Meditation V, that the most basic epistemic proposition has already been demonstrated.[141] This means, in turn, that the demonstration of the reliability of 'the general rule of truth' is supposed to occur right between the first proof for the existence of God, which is in Meditation III, and the second proof, which is in Meditation V.

The standard objection to the epistemic procedure of the *Meditations* is, of course, that Descartes is arguing in a circle, namely, by first employing some clear and distinct ideas in particular in order to attempt to establish that God exists and does not deceive, and by then appealing to the existence and veracity of God in order to try to show that all clear and distinct ideas in general are true. In other words, 'the Cartesian circle' consists in the mutually conditional statements that one can be certain that whatever one clearly and distinctly perceives is true only if one is sure that God exists and does not deceive, on the one hand, and that one can be certain that God exists and does not deceive only if one is sure that whatever one clearly and distinctly perceives is true, on the other hand.

As intriguing as the dispute about the virtues or vices of this circle may be,[142] it is surprising how badly it has obfuscated a crucial issue, namely, that it is wayward to try to determine a notion of knowledge without attempting to achieve a concept of evidence. For whatever is adduced in order to legitimate evidence must in turn itself be legitimated by means of further evidence. Thus the validation of some evidence presupposes the validity of other evidence, so that evidence can be validated only by other or more or better evidence.[143] The point is that there can be nothing more epistemi-

[137] Cf. Synopsis, § 3: '… meum praecipuum argumentum ad probandum Dei existentiam …'.

[138] Cf. III, § 25, passim.

[139] See Synopsis, § 4: 'In quarta [Meditatione], probatur ea omnia quae clare et distincte percipimus, esse vera … .'

[140] See § 17.

[141] See § 6: '… et iam fuse demonstravi illa omnia quae clare cognosco esse vera.' To be sure, this formulation does not explicitly say that 'I have already demonstrated in detail that all those things which I clearly *and distinctly* cognize are true'. None the less, the reference to 'the general rule of truth' is unambiguous and one must assume that here Descartes is using 'clare' as shorthand for 'clare et distincte'. Here one also has to consider that in the *Meditations* Descartes does not focus on the problem of the relationship between the clarity of a perception and the distinctness of the same with that degree of discrimination which he employs in this regard in the *Principles*. Of which see more below.

[142] Cf., e.g., AT, VII, 124–126 vs. 140 & 146; 214 vs. 245–246; 277–279 vs. 361–362; 418–419 vs. 444–445; 399 & 405 vs. AT, IX/1, 211; AT, V, 148 vs. 149 & 178; etc.

[143] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewißheit / On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford, 1969), § 672: ' "Wenn ich *der* Evidenz nicht traue, warum soll ich dann irgendeiner Evidenz trauen?" '

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cally basic than evidence. Therefore the genuinely vicious circularity lies in thinking that there were something other than evidence to which one could appeal in order to stabilize evidence that has become shaky. Yet there is something special about the character of evidence that renders it intrinsically inimical to the foundationalist project of transcending its vagaries, verisimilitudes, and vicissitudes. In other words, evidence is not 'linear' in nature – neither in the vertical sense of coming down to a primary base nor in the horizontal sense of arriving at an ultimate goal. So, as becomes obvious in the case of Descartes' argument in the *Meditations*, the viciousness at issue stems, not from the circularity of the argument itself, but from the gratuitous denial of the circularity.[144] Descartes' real problem is *the evanescence of evidence*.

Here the *Regulæ* play a key role. For their concept of evidence is still uncluttered by the later metaphysical and theological presuppositions. After all, the *Meditations* deliver a theological epistemology by positing God as epistemically more basic than evidence. Indeed, the *Meditations* grow organically out of both the 'Treatise on Metaphysics' and the 'Metaphysical Correspondence', where God is the truth-maker and the truth-keeper because he makes truths true and preserves them thus. On the contrary, the *Regulæ* do not even attempt to argue that there can be a divine guarantee for the universality and for the necessity of the connection between evidence and truth. Therefore human beings are made and held fully responsible for their inferences. Whether truths are true because God wills them to be or whether he wills them to be because they are, is a typical onto-theo-logical concern of the kind that postdates the *Regulæ*.[145]

Text and Context III: The 'Regulæ' and the 'Principles' (1644) [146]

Since it is impossible here to compare and to contrast the *Regulæ* and the *Principles of Philosophy* – both of which were destined to remain fragments – in general, it must suffice to continue to concentrate in particular on the issue that runs like a red thread throughout Descartes' philosophy, namely, the nature of knowledge. To be sure, one should beware of reducing Descartes' philosophy to epistemology; none the less, he himself does not regard knowledge narrowly as having little or nothing to do with mathematics or with physics, for example. In fact, as the *Regulæ* themselves show, the attempt to find an answer to the question about knowledge has a universal and ineluctable relevance seldom encountered in other issues. In any case, the nature, acquisition, and limits of human knowledge is the single most important topic of the *Regulæ*.

Now, proceeding on the hypothesis that Descartes' position on knowledge did undergo a systematic development from the *Regulæ* – via the 'Treatise on Metaphysics', the 'Metaphysical Correspondence', the *Discourse*, and the *Meditations* – to the *Principles*,

[144] In any case, since no author as such has the final authority, de facto or de jure, over the interpretation of what they have written, the reader is free to interpret the epistemology of Descartes' *Meditations* as a *reductio ad absurdum* of one version of theological foundationalism.

[145] Cf., once again, Letters to Mersenne, Apr. 15 (AT, I, 135–147), May 6 (ibid., pp. 148–150), and May 27, 1630 (ibid., pp. 151–154).

[146] In this section I have, inter alia, adapted and improved some formulations from the Introduction to my earlier edition *René Descartes, Meditationes de prima philosophia / Meditations on First Philosophy: A Bilingual Edition* (Notre Dame, 1990) – cf. esp. ibid., pp. 36–42.

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